

Continuities and Discontinuities: Reaction to the Disruption in Three Highland Parishes

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Dr David Paton, who gave a paper to this Society a few years ago, having conducted research in the Northern Highlands, visualises the Disruption as constituting a revival in itself. The argument for this interpretation centres on the Disruption being the climax of achievement of “popular Highland Presbyterianism, the practices and ideology of which provided a template for the new Free Church” and the fact that, if “Christ’s headship was truly in contest, then a quickening in religious life, a positive expression of divine presence, might almost be expected.”¹ In this sense, and in certain areas at any rate, the Disruption of 1843 could be seen as a continuity, a continuation of a pattern of revivals which started in Easter Ross, for example, in the early eighteenth century or in Skye in the early nineteenth century.

On the other hand the Disruption could clearly be regarded as a discontinuity, a fracturing of a long-established set-up whereby, despite eighteenth-century schisms, developing churches like the Baptists and some lingering Roman Catholicism and Episcopalianism, the Established Church of Scotland provided a solid identity, both at national and at community level. The parochial system, providing a focus for worship at local level, together with attendant educational and social responsibilities, was dramatically affected in many parts of Scotland, including the Highlands, as the Free Church emerged as an alternative nationwide system, seeing itself as the alternative if not the “true” Church of the nation.

Before investigating possible patterns of continuity and discontinuity in the three selected parishes, the thrust of this particular paper, it is appropriate briefly to outline the purpose of the thesis from which the

¹ D. Paton, *The Church in the Northern Highlands 1790-1850: Spiritual Witness and Social Crisis* (Open University, Ph.D. thesis, 2000).

material has been taken. The research focused on the different responses of these three Highland parishes to the Disruption. As Douglas Ansdell has affirmed, the Disruption forms a “complex area of historical enquiry in which a variety of factors are involved”, thus creating a “need for local studies to provide an explanation for events”.² As documents such as correspondence of the time can demonstrate the society of the period was still a series of intimate localities, although inevitably the balance between nation, regions and local communities was experiencing a continuum of change.

In recognition of the issues exposed by Ansdell, including differentials between parishes, the thesis sought to address the need for pursuing local studies in the search for explanations for reactions to the Disruption. Consequently, recognising also the value of comparison, it adopted a case study approach, seeking a broad basis of information and exploring the dynamics of life in each community, in order to discover how these particular Highland communities actually responded to the Disruption and why. In revealing localised differentials it also pointed to the varying applicability of broad generalisations in local contexts.

Three communities were chosen for this study, having been identified as displaying differing responses to the Disruption. The parish was selected as the geographical dimension, since the relationship to a particular church and minister can be readily determined and such a decision obviates any arbitrariness in setting community boundaries.

The first community chosen, Tain in Easter Ross, constitutes a parish in which the minister, elders and virtually the whole congregation “came out” in the Disruption. The second community, the parish of Strath in the southern half of the Isle of Skye, witnessed a completely contrasting reaction. The minister, elders and a vast majority of the congregation remained within the fold of the Established Church. The final community to be selected, Portree, in northern Skye, displayed a third type of reaction in that the minister stayed “in” but lost a majority of his parishioners to the Free Church.

² D. Ansdell, “Disruptions and controversies in the Highland Church” in J. Kirk, ed., *The Church in the Highlands* (Edinburgh, 1998).

The principal factor in selecting the parishes having been, as stated above, their conflicting responses to the Disruption, it was not necessary to pick communities in three different areas of the Highlands and Islands. Indeed, this could have placed too great an emphasis on spatial contrasts and varying regional contexts. Similarly, adopting a socio-economic approach and picking parishes displaying differing profiles would have created an imbalance of causal factors. Focusing, however, on the interaction between minister and parishioners, a central theme in any community, did not obviate the choice of two parishes contiguous with one another.

In selecting Tain as a parish solidly adhering to the Free Church the principal factor was its location within an area displaying a comparatively lengthy and strong association with evangelical religion. The two Skye parishes were selected in order to investigate the fascinating fact that two adjoining communities, seemingly similar in profile, displayed contrasting responses to the Disruption.

It has to be recognised that, despite the variety of source material located and trawled, there were significant gaps, such as the curiosity of the missing kirk session records for the immediate pre-Disruption years in Tain. The most glaring omissions were records of how the ordinary people viewed their daily existence, their attitudes to religious movements and events and their relationships with one another. Nonetheless, recalling Ansdell's contention that "historical enquiry will often provide explanations that individuals could subscribe to while at the same time retaining more personal reasons",³ the information recovered had considerable merit. These "traces" disclosed very different images in the three parishes and revealed a complex web of possible explanatory factors which both embraced (in differing combinations and priorities) and moved outwith the range of theories propounded by past historians. As such, a valuable, though still limited, picture could be constructed, highlighting the dangers of over-application of blanket theories.

In this paper the three communities will be looked at separately in order to furnish an impression as to the relative significance of continuities

³ Ansdell, "Disruptions and controversies", 93.

and discontinuities in parishioners' lives, an attempt being made in conclusion to offer comparisons and to suggest a more general view of Disruption impact.

Tain

As intimated earlier, Tain displayed an almost wholesale adherence to the Free Church. Situated in a coastal area, this parish comprised a relatively prosperous small burgh, a surrounding agricultural area and Inver, a tiny fishing village. Topographically it was low-lying with few inherent geographical difficulties of communication between its constituent parts. Although lacking a harbour, access to the parish by public roads in all directions was good by contemporary standards. The burgh, a royal burgh, was an administrative and commercial centre, in the latter case principally displaying an interdependence with its rural hinterland. This agricultural area witnessed distinct improvements in the first half of the nineteenth century. This fact, coupled in the burgh with much new building, constantly developing services such as lighting, water and postal deliveries, an increasingly sophisticated range of educational facilities and a growing use of English rather than Gaelic, are all indicative of a community in transition.

As regards secular governance, unlike the Skye parishes where power, in each case, was vested in two distinct landowners, in Tain there were several landowners as well as a merchant class in the burgh. Additionally, completely altering the balance of power, there was an elected town council in the burgh, headed by an elected provost.⁴

The town council had a wide remit, as the council book of Tain reveals. This included responsibility for supporting transport in general and carriage of mail within and without the parish, providing the services of drainage, sewerage, water supply and disposal of refuse, providing grants to private educational establishments and discussing medical provision for the poor. It also concerned itself with ecclesiastical matters, such as electing a

⁴ I.R.M. Mowat, *Easter Ross 1750-1850, The Double Frontier* (Edinburgh, 1998), 65.

representative to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland or allocating the division of seats in the new church, opened in 1815.⁵

Until 1843, when Dingwall was declared to be the county town of Ross, the majority of head courts were held in Tain, which also witnessed meetings of the justices of the peace. Fairs and markets attracted the lower classes for their social significance and a Masonic lodge and assembly rooms provided more prestigious social occasions, although Tain, in common with the other burghs of Easter Ross, was socially, as indeed commercially, “overshadowed” by Inverness.⁶

Before turning to the ecclesiastical sphere, it is apposite at this juncture to consider socio-economic and cultural continuities and discontinuities. Having commented above on the various indicators of a community in transition, it would be appropriate to declare these as part of a continuum of change, in no way precipitated by the Disruption. Indeed, in the absence of confirmatory data it would be inappropriate to suppose that the basic socio-economic situation in Tain was affected by this upheaval in the national church, certainly as far as a majority of parishioners was concerned. The fact that Dingwall was accorded the status of county town in 1843, robbing Tain of primacy in this sphere, was in no way connected with the ecclesiastical struggles, but the culmination of an ongoing battle for supremacy between the two burghs. The one sector of the population who would have been affected by the Disruption and experienced a sense of discontinuity was the group of paupers receiving poor relief. Those on the poors roll, receiving contributions collected voluntarily by the Established Church, would have been subject to vagaries and fluctuations, as the new Free Church endeavoured to “plug the gap” left by the considerable reduction of funds in the residual or Established Church created by its sudden, dramatic drop in membership. How much these folk at the bottom end of the social scale were actually affected cannot be definitively determined in the sources: undoubtedly many of them would rely on the beneficence of individuals – even more so than in the pre-1843 period.

⁵ National Archives of Scotland [NAS], B 70/6/2, B 70/6/3, B 70/6/4, Council Book of Tain.

⁶ Mowat, *Easter Ross*, 66-67.

Culturally there would have been little change. The historical prevalence of evangelical religion, gradually gaining momentum in the “Days of the Fathers”, the pious clergy of Ross-shire of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, ensured a continuum of change to a lower level of reliance on intoxicating liquor. The significance of fairs and markets was dropping on economic grounds and entertainment for the “monied” classes was developing along similar paths to that being experienced elsewhere, such as agricultural societies and Masonic Lodges. The linguistic drift from Gaelic to English as the principal tongue, occurring more swiftly in the burgh than among the rural and fisher folk, reflected the increasing links with the Lowlands, suggested by such elements as improving physical communication and inward migration. Likewise, the addition of a Free Church school after the Disruption basically echoed the constantly developing interest in education in the parish, witnessed in the increasing variety of schools being opened over the years. There are no grounds discernible in available “traces” to suggest a sudden change, precipitated by the Disruption, in any of these facets.

As regards the seemingly dramatic change in the religious environment occasioned by the reaction in Tain to the Disruption, this merits considerably closer examination and analysis. The ecclesiastical sphere, again, like the secular arena, was more complex than that appertaining in the Skye communities, the patron of the parish changing between 1794 and 1828 from Kenneth Mackenzie of Cromarty to Lady Elibank and finally the Honourable Mrs Hay Mackenzie of Cromarty.⁷

In the absence of a specific comprehensive list of heritors, identifying heritors is fraught with difficulty. Certainly, in contrast with Skye, they were more numerous and drawn from a variety of walks of life, including landowners such as Hugh Rose of Glastullich, and prominent burgesses and merchants of the burgh, for example the provost, treasurer, a druggist and a mason. A number of names appear on the town council as well as the presbytery and kirk session, stressing the interdependence of the secular body and the ecclesiastical courts.

⁷ A. Duff, Introduction by, *Disruption Worthies, Volume II, Disruption Worthies of the Highlands, Another Memorial of 1843* (Edinburgh, 1877), 58.

The Disruption was not the first schism to hit Tain. Mowat asserts that, due to high seat rents in the parish church, a number of parishioners were persuaded to “build their own chapel in 1836, with assistance from the United Associate Synod”.⁸ Although this bald assertion may hide unstated reasons contributing to this secession, nonetheless material trawled from a report published by the Commissioners of Religious Instruction, Scotland, in 1838 would suggest that the problem of seat rents was indeed the precipitating factor.⁹

The parish was firmly embedded in a district remarkable for its history of evangelical revivals from the early eighteenth century onwards. Indeed, the communion season of 1840 in Tain inspired a continuation of this trend, as it led to a distinct revival within the parish and neighbouring parts of Easter Ross, fuelled by Tain’s minister, Charles Calder Mackintosh and the zealous Macdonald of Ferintosh.

Certainly, looking at purely ecclesiastical and spiritual facets, the strength of support for the non-intrusion position and for the abolition of patronage in this traditionally evangelically-led parish is clearly revealed in the sources. A report published in *The Witness*, on 26 April 1843, apprises its nationwide readership of the formation of an association “for the maintenance of a Free Presbyterian Church in our land, and for the purpose of building a Church in town”. As well as £500 having been so far “subscribed for the Church”, the erection of a “tent” made of “slab deals” was already underway on the “Links of Tain for the worthy and respected minister of the parish to preach in during the summer, and when the Church is building”.¹⁰

The minister’s stance on the religio-political situation was firm. Although recognising the “value of a rightly constituted establishment” he did not consider any “external advantages the State afforded would justify the surrender by the Church of her freedom to obey all the will of her divine Lord”. Charles Calder Mackintosh did indeed “come out”, quitting

⁸ Mowat, *Easter Ross*, 121.

⁹ *Fourth Report of the Commissioners of Religious Instruction, Scotland* (1838), 296-297.

¹⁰ *The Witness*, iv, 26 April 1843.

his manse. Within the pages of his own diary is inscribed the following words: “1843, May 18th. – A memorable day for Scotland. Separated, with all my heart, from the State.” Although a vast majority of his parishioners “accompanied him out”, the patroness, the Honourable Mrs Hay Mackenzie of Cromarty, patron of many Ross-shire parishes, who had “always made her presentations a matter of conscience, so that she naturally did not see the necessity for the Disruption”, expressed regret at the departure of “all her ministers” from the Establishment.¹¹

The *Inverness Courier* of 14 June 1843 reports on the minister’s farewell sermon in the Establishment and his explanation of the events surrounding the Disruption and reasons for separating from the State. Although the church was “pretty full”, few of the “neighbouring gentry” were present. The congregation was, however, fully prepared for the situation now accruing. A week later the paper records the Reverend Mackintosh’s first sermon in the new Free Church, the attendance being “large”.¹² The description available of this first service in the Free Church conveys a picture of a dignified and impressive occasion. The congregation “met with” the minister, “in a wooden building, hurriedly erected, even the magistrates of the town, preceded by their red-coated, halbert-armed officers, walking in procession, and taking their place of honour in the Free, as they were wont to do in the Established Church”.¹³

Progress in establishing the Free Church in Tain was swift. No problems of site refusal marred this progress. At the end of June a number of women in the town, according to the *Inverness Courier*, presented the minister with “an elegantly-bound pulpit Bible and Psalm Book, which are to be used in the Free Church”. On 30 August it was reported that the foundation-stone for the new church had been laid.¹⁴ The church was opened by the Reverend Doctor McDonald on 17 October 1843.¹⁵

¹¹ Duff, *Disruption Worthies*, 56-59.

¹² *Inverness Courier*, 14 June and 21 June 1843.

¹³ T. Brown, *Annals of the Disruption 1843*, (Edinburgh, 1892 edn.), 221.

¹⁴ *Inverness Courier*, 5 July and 30 August 1843.

¹⁵ *The Free Church Magazine*, i, 1844, 352.

The popularity of the new Free Church in Tain can be gleaned from information furnished in the preceding paragraphs, but the sources have failed to disclose the exact numbers involved. Mowat asserts that “in parishes like Tain, where the congregation were following their ministers over eighty per cent of the population seceded”,¹⁶ a population which comprised 3,128 souls in 1841, according to the Census. Certainly the entire eldership of the Established Church signed the Act of Demission and adhered to the Free Church.¹⁷ The Establishment, on the other hand, was supported by comparatively few, numbers quoted varying from 80 to 200, according to the bias of sources.

The above material, highlighting events in the ecclesiastical arena within the parish as the months moved on to May 1843 and the immediate aftermath of the Disruption, would appear to paint a confusing picture of continuities and discontinuities. No longer was the Established Church the focus of the community. However, was this change essentially a discontinuity in terms of worship? The same minister was now leading his congregation in the newly formed Free Church, supported by the entire body of elders who had supported him in the Establishment. It is unlikely that he would have changed anything with regard to religious ordinances and his message from the pulpit would have remained strictly evangelical. The vast majority of his parishioners were still with him. From such angles, spiritually important, the Disruption merely represented continuity with what had gone before. Discontinuity lay in the need to erect a new building for worship and a new manse together with the need to tap into a new system of funding ministerial provision – practical manifestations of change – and also in a severance from the traditional parochial system and interference from civil courts in purely religious matters. The latter was a religio-political issue, which had been the subject of such bitter controversy, culminating in the Ten Years’ Conflict. The former represented the material, financial price to be paid for separation from the state.

¹⁶ Mowat, *Easter Ross*, 122.

¹⁷ NAS, CH3/748/1, Tain Free Church Session Book.

Strath

Strath constitutes the community where, in complete contrast to Tain, the minister and the vast majority of his parishioners remained within the Establishment. The parish at that time consisted essentially of small rural townships, many of them crofting settlements. Located to the south of the Cuillin Mountains which straddle the central belt of Skye, it possessed numerous inaccessible districts due to sub-mountainous conditions and this presented the Church with considerable communication difficulties. Lacking a significant focus in the sense of a burgh or even multi-functional village like its neighbour, Portree, its inhabitants eked out a Spartan existence on poor land. Thus, unlike Tain, the occupational profile was fairly limited, its educational facilities somewhat rudimentary, its linguistic situation that of a predominantly Gaelic-speaking population and its simple secular governance reflecting its position as a typical Highland rural community. Below the level of the two landowners was a small class of tacksmen or tenant farmers, the bulk of the population renting minute tracts of land or even being totally landless.

The greater part of the parish lay within the estates of Lord Macdonald, his affairs being handled locally by his factor on Skye, not resident in Strath. A small area in the west of the parish was owned by Mr. McAllister. Although the latter, unlike Lord Macdonald, was sometimes resident on his estate, his local factor managed its running on his behalf.

Within the socio-economic and cultural contexts the Disruption would appear to have had no determinable impact: life would seem to have continued on a similar course. Agricultural change, in terms of a move from a system of run-rig to that of lotting had started about 1811 on the Macdonald estates, movement of population continuing gradually, creating a sense of tenurial insecurity. The financial problems of Lord Macdonald, culminating in his estates passing into the hands of trustees, had occurred prior to 1843. Finally, the Established Church continued to be the focus of parish life, at least in terms of its social and educational responsibilities, the geographical limitations on access to worship being unaltered.

As intimated within the examination of Tain, the ecclesiastical sphere, like the secular arena, was relatively simple in comparison with that of the Easter Ross parish. The identity of the patron is quite clear: it was the

crown.¹⁸ As regards the heritors, *The New Statistical Account*, penned by the minister, the Reverend John Mackinnon, affirms that the two landowners, Lord Macdonald and Mr McAllister of Strathaird, were the only two existing in the parish.¹⁹

Little has been uncovered in the sources relating to events and movements occurring over the months leading up to the Disruption. This could be significant in the sense that the momentous event scarcely touched the lives of parishioners, but firm conclusions should not be taken from lack of evidence. It should be noted at this juncture that there are no extant kirk session records for the period being studied. Within the presbytery, a motion to ignore the Veto Act as illegal was moved by Strath's minister, seemingly a Moderate, seconded by the Reverend Coll Macdonald, minister of Portree, and carried,²⁰ not too surprisingly in this heavily Moderate body.

Scant evidence has been traced in the sources concerning evangelical activity in Strath during the months prior to the Disruption. There is reference to an evangelical minister preaching in Strathaird and then in the church at Broadford in October 1842 at the tail end of the revival which swept the north of the island. Although the people seemed eager to hear him, the incident incurred the minister's displeasure and the event does not appear to have affected reactions to the Disruption in Strath.²¹ Lamont also refers to the fact that some "able ministers and some Divinity doctors were haranguing crowds not far from the Broadford church" in the summer of 1843, the crowds listening attentively to the orators. He then relates that a "meeting of Session was called", the minister leaving it to the "wisdom" of the elders as to how they would react to the Disruption, stating when asked that he was an old man, had "seen the end of many a change" and that he "proposed to remain in the old Church". The elders unanimously agreed to

¹⁸ J. Sinclair, *Statistical Account* (1795), 226; *The New Statistical Account of Scotland*, xiv (1845), 312.

¹⁹ *The New Statistical Account of Scotland*, xiv (1845), 304.

²⁰ NAS, CH2/330/4, Presbytery of Skye Records, 8.

²¹ S. Taylor, *Skye Revival*, magazine produced and written by Steve Taylor (Dualchas Collection, HCA, Portree, 1997), 2.

remain with him, as indeed did the bulk of the congregation.²² This report, by admission, relies on oral tradition. Although tallying with the documented reaction of minister and parishioners, the timing of these incidents in relation to the Disruption is not clear.

In the immediate aftermath of the Disruption, therefore, the situation was one of overwhelming support for the Establishment. There was scant interest in the Free Church. Although the *Annals of the Free Church of Scotland* affirm that the parish was served after the Disruption by catechists,²³ no date is given for the commencement of their activity. Indeed, a negative view, from a Free Church perspective, is painted in another Free Church source. The Reverend Donald Cameron, visiting Strath in 1850, refers to the visit of a “very able and respected minister” a “few years ago” (again date unspecified), who found himself preaching to a mere handful of folk and had pronounced that it was “really in vain to send them a missionary or a minister”²⁴.

The Free Church did ultimately gain a foothold in Strath, in the district of Strathaird owned by McAllister and situated at the furthest distance from the parish church. On Lord Macdonald’s estate, by far the larger section of the parish, “probably less than 100 adults” adhered to the Free Church.²⁵ Even allowing for some interest in Strathaird, where the inhabitants were considerably fewer in number than in the populous areas around Broadford, this remains a still fairly insubstantial Free Church following in a parish whose population increased slightly from 3,150 in 1841 to 3,243 in 1851.²⁶ This is a very different situation from that accruing in its neighbour, the parish of Portree, as will be seen.

However, before considering the question of continuities and discontinuities in the ecclesiastical sphere, it should be added that a Baptist

²² D. Lamont, *Strath: In Isle of Skye*, (originally published in Glasgow, 1913, reprinted 1984), 94-95.

²³ *Annals of the Free Church of Scotland*, ii (1914), 233.

²⁴ *The Home and Foreign Record of the Free Church of Scotland*, i (1851), 224.

²⁵ *Reports from Committees (9): Sites for Churches (Scotland)*, (1847), 3rd Report, 49 and 56.

²⁶ *Numbers of the Inhabitants in the Years 1801, 1811, 1821, 1831, 1841, 1851 (Scotland)* (1852), 80-81.

mission existed in the parish, having been settled by the mid-1820s. Following a revival which affected the Baptist congregation in the immediate pre-Disruption years, its membership only rose slightly, although “listeners” did increase in numbers.²⁷ This latter observation could be interpreted as indicating that evangelically-minded folk sought spiritual refreshment in Baptist preaching while retaining membership of the Established Church, thus obviating the need to defect to the Free Church – an uncorroborated suggestion which could complicate but not invalidate the general impression of Establishment support in 1843.

The situation in Strath, therefore, would appear to have been one of continuity in terms of clerical leadership, religious services, pulpit message and places of worship as well as the fact of remaining within the parochial system and retaining links with the state. The eventual foundation of a Free Church in Strathaird seems to have witnessed only a minimal impact, the epithet of “ungodly” applied to Strath by the breakaway Church seeming indeed to be appropriate from an evangelical stance. Strath, indeed, it would appear from the sources, constituted a parish largely untouched by the Disruption, experiencing a strong sense of continuity with the past. However, the dangers of missing evidence, to be specific the actual views of the parishioners themselves, require to be recognized, as well as the uncertain influence of the Baptists, and therefore such a definitive statement should be treated with caution.

Portree

This parish, although geographically contiguous with Strath, presents a very different picture regarding reaction to the Disruption, as intimated earlier. The minister of Portree, Coll Macdonald, in common with the minister of Strath, remained within the Establishment. However, a majority of his parishioners left his flock and adhered to the Free Church. It was a parish bearing many similarities to its neighbour in that it consisted principally of small rural, mainly crofting, townships. However, unlike Strath, whose attendant islands Pabbay and Scalpay were sparsely

²⁷ D. Meek, “The Independent and Baptist Churches of Highland Perthshire and Strathspey, including Appendix C, The Baptist Churches of Skye”, *TGSI*, 56, 336.

populated, the islands attached to the parish of Portree, particularly Raasay, carried a more numerous population. Adding together the dramatic split occasioned by the Sound of Raasay, an extensive sea coast, with intermittent cliffs, plus considerable areas of hill slopes, this parish topographically presents a scenario of considerable communication problems.

In contrast to Strath, the section on Skye itself contained the modest multi-functional village of Portree, housing within its bounds diminutive merchant and professional classes. However, a majority of parishioners scratched a meagre living on poor land. Consequently, despite Portree possessing an intermittently used court-house and jail, its occupational profile was essentially not dissimilar to that of Strath. Its communication difficulties, tenurial insecurity, educational and linguistic situation and secular governance reveal it to have been, like Strath, a fairly typical Highland rural community.

Portree even shared a landowner with its neighbour, the Skye sector of the parish being within the estates of Lord Macdonald. Raasay, with its attendant islands, was in the hands of MacLeod of Raasay, who, unlike Macdonald, spent a considerable proportion of his time living on this estate. However, due to being made bankrupt, he was forced to sell the islands in November 1843.²⁸ They passed into the hands of George Rainy, an Edinburgh businessman who was a staunch supporter of the Free Church. Both estates were handled by factors, that of MacLeod living within the parish, whereas Lord Macdonald's man was based elsewhere in Skye.

This socio-economic and cultural picture, so similar to that of Strath, appears, like its neighbour, to have undergone little change as a result of the Disruption. However, in the Skye section of the parish, on the lands of Lord Macdonald, tenurial insecurity increased. This furnishes a discontinuity in that adherence to the Free Church, and particularly being active in raising funds for it, constituted an excuse for turning a tenant and his family off his land. In common with other parishes in the Highlands where the proprietor was hostile to the Free Church, references exist which disclose the fact that tenants of this parish were evicted because of their adherence to the new Church. Nicolson, for example, affirms that Macdonald or his

²⁸ *Inverness Courier*, 8 November 1843.

representatives, scornfully rejecting petitions from Portree folk for a site for a church, showed such bitterness towards the Free Church that numbers of people were evicted solely because they were adherents.²⁹ A final point: again those on the poors roll, as in Tain, would experience vagaries and fluctuations in cover, especially in a parish dominated by the poor.

Turning to the ecclesiastical sphere, the patron was again, as in the case of Strath, the crown.³⁰ The heritors were likewise the two landowners, Lord Macdonald and MacLeod of Raasay.³¹

A mission of the United Secession Church was founded in Portree in 1840, its first resident missionary being appointed in March 1842, but the reasons for its foundation and the size of its membership are shrouded in uncertainty. As regards movements in the parish during the months leading up to the Disruption, little evidence has appeared in the sources. No kirk session records are available prior to 1854, but a few happenings within the parish and certain attitudes have been trawled from other sources. A religious revival which started in Waternish in 1841³² gradually spread across the north of the island, the next in a series of revivals which had first hit the area in 1805. The Reverend Fraser from Kirkhill, near Inverness, answered the call for more ministers to assist in the revival and was highly impressed by his experience of preaching at Sconser, in the parish of Portree, in October 1842. The thirst for evangelical preaching during this period of “heightened spiritual fervour” was reflected in the distances people travelled and, in this case, despite the discomfort of wet weather and the necessity of sitting on the “shingle of the sea-shore, the demand for a further sermon”.³³

²⁹ A. Nicolson, *History of Skye*, (2nd edn., Portree, 1994), 251.

³⁰ *Moral Statistics of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland* (1826), xxxvii; Sinclair, *Statistical Account*, 155.

³¹ Sinclair, *The Statistical Account of Scotland, Volume Sixteenth* (Edinburgh, 1795), 155.

³² D. Meek, “Gaelic Bible, revival and mission: the spiritual rebirth of the nineteenth-century Highlands” in J. Kirk, ed., *The Church in the Highlands*, (Edinburgh, 1998), 126; A. MacRae, *Revivals in the Highlands and Islands in the 19th Century*, (Stirling, n.d.), 75-77.

³³ Taylor, *Skye Revival*, 1-2.

The minister, as his presbytery action noted under Strath suggests, as well as his behaviour at the Disruption, supported the view of the Moderates. He seriously misjudged, however, the leanings of his parishioners, stating in 1841 that their attachment to the Established Church was “inviolable”.³⁴ Nicolson affirms that “from the great numbers that defected from his charge, it would appear that his ministry failed to appeal to those who were carried away by the new evangelical movement in this part of Skye”.³⁵ As MacCowan asserts, “godly elders, catechists, and Gaelic teachers” had a powerful influence and were held in high regard for their piety,³⁶ an intimation of a strong lay role in parishes such as Portree. Indeed it is noted that certain teachers in the parish signed the Act of Demission³⁷ and the significant role of the lay spiritual body known as “The Men” is emphasized in the sources.

Donald Mackinnon makes the following bald statements: “Mr. Coll Macdonald remained in the Establishment. Almost all his congregation adhered to the Free Church”.³⁸ Although no Free Church presbytery or kirk session records for the appropriate period have been discovered, a number of sources reveal information about the immediate post-Disruption situation in the parish. The Reverend Roderick MacLeod’s submission to the Select Committee on Sites for Churches in 1847 states that approximately 1,100 souls adhered to the Free Church in the district of Portree out of a population of approximately 2,500. Later he adds that all the residents of Raasay, nearly another 1,000 folk, had supported the Free Church.³⁹ This represents a high proportion of the inhabitants, who numbered 3,574 in 1841 and 3,557 in 1851.⁴⁰ No figures are available for numbers remaining in the Establishment, but by implication these would have been relatively small.

³⁴ *The New Statistical Account of Scotland*, xiv (1845), 225.

³⁵ Nicolson, *History of Skye*, 252.

³⁶ R. MacCowan, *The Men of Skye* (Glasgow, 1902), 83.

³⁷ NAS, Presbytery of Skye Records, CH2/330/4, 29.

³⁸ D. Mackinnon, *Annals of a Skye Parish* (Portree, ?1906), 22.

³⁹ *Reports from Committees: (9): Sites for Churches (Scotland)* (1847), 3rd Report, 34 and 36.

⁴⁰ *Numbers of the Inhabitants in the Years 1801, 1811, 1821, 1831, 1841, 1851 (Scotland)* (1852), 80-81.

Following the Disruption the Reverend MacLeod, who was minister of the neighbouring parish of Snizort, “formed the seceding people” in Portree “into a congregation and ordained elders”. He himself would preach in Portree on Sabbath evenings “after he had officiated in his own church” and continued to minister to the Portree adherents for six years, the first Free Church minister only being appointed in 1849.⁴¹ The building in which the congregation worshipped was “at one time used as a Gaelic school-house” and was later extended. In 1847 it was recorded that Lord Macdonald was still refusing to provide a site for a church on his estate in the parish of Portree.⁴²

The situation in Raasay was somewhat different. According to Sharpe, the new proprietor, George Rainy, “reserved the use of the church in Raasay”, built originally for the Established Church, “for the Free Church”, the Established minister being refused admittance. Sharpe continues by declaring that “initially the spiritual needs of the Raasay congregation were then served either by probationers and catechists or by visiting ministers from Skye”.⁴³ The apparently wholesale adherence of the Raasay population to the Free Church is claimed by MacCowan to have been “the result of the instruction, on the principles at stake in the Ten Years’ Conflict, disseminated by the ‘men’”.⁴⁴

Certainly in Portree, therefore, there was a distinct sense of discontinuities. The majority of parishioners in the Skye section of the parish were served in terms of worship principally by the neighbouring evangelical minister, the Reverend Roderick MacLeod, as intimated earlier. The break with the Establishment has been seen to have been total on Raasay, the needs of the inhabitants being met by visiting religious personnel. For the minority, however, who remained within the Established Church or in the recently formed Secession congregation, their lives in terms of worship would have experienced a sense of continuity. Nevertheless, the frailer link

⁴¹ Mackinnon, *Annals*, 27-28.

⁴² *Reports from Committees (9): Sites for Churches (Scotland)* (1847), 1st Report, 6; 3rd Report, 49, 56.

⁴³ R. Sharpe, *Raasay: A Study in Island History*, (London, 1977), 186-187 and 73.

⁴⁴ MacCowan, *The Men of Skye*, 36.

with the Establishment and its attendant educational and social responsibilities created by the dramatic decline in membership would have led to considerable financial difficulties in a parish dominated by the poorer sector of the population, the new and numerically substantial Free Church congregation only gradually being able to link in with an alternative system being developed by their national body. As in Tain, the parish church was no longer the focus of the community, as it still was in Strath. However, in contrast to Tain, the new church lacked its own minister, Coll Macdonald having elected to lead his diminutive flock within the Establishment.

Although, therefore, it could be declared that Portree experienced a stronger sense of discontinuity than Strath, there are caveats. Portree parishioners had been involved in evangelical revivals and, although there is no definitive material available to confirm that Coll Macdonald's congregation was already depleted prior to the Disruption (indeed, as indicated earlier, he had believed them to be loyal), numbers of parishioners may well have proceeded fairly regularly to Snizort to hear the evangelical MacLeod preach. On Raasay, although no evidence has come to light concerning the influence of the missionary minister, Mr McCallum, already appointed by March, 1842,⁴⁵ and there were also other forces at work, including the presence of evangelically-inspired "Men" such as Alexander MacLeod, it could be conjectured that his message was evangelical, due to the island's unanimous support for the Free Church in 1843. Indeed, it could also be asserted that "The Men", highly active throughout the parish in the years preceding the Disruption, constituted a continuity in themselves, as their input would have been required to continue in this large, geographically unwieldy parish which had basically severed connections with the Established Church, but lacked its own minister to head this secession.

Comparisons and Conclusions

The material explored in this paper has demonstrated not only different reactions to the Disruption in the three parishes but also a varied pattern of

⁴⁵ NAS, CH2/330/4,15, Presbytery of Skye Records.

continuities and discontinuities. Although the socio-economic and cultural environments in Strath and Portree essentially showed continuity in the sense that the daily lives of parishioners proceeded along a similar course, there were distinct differentials in the ecclesiastical field. Indeed, the one discernible socio-economic differential reflects religious affiliation. Although tenurial insecurity in Strath would have remained unchanged, in Portree it would have increased within the estates of Lord Macdonald as a result of adherence to the Free Church.

Despite some earlier mentioned caveats relating to missing evidence, the ecclesiastical situation in Strath basically represented continuity, the Established Church retaining its position as the focus of parish life, inasmuch as topographical difficulties permitted. On the other hand, in Portree adherence to the breakaway Church was considerable, representing a discontinuity with traditional worship patterns. The majority of parishioners had to look outwith the parish for ministerial coverage and their regular worship would have been accompanied by evangelical preaching rather than the sermons of a Moderate minister. Attendant social and educational responsibilities of the Church would also have fractured. Nevertheless some continuity has been suggested in the work of “The Men”, ministry on Raasay and links with the neighbouring evangelical minister, Roderick MacLeod.

The Tain picture, as intimated earlier, is one of a notable mixture of continuities and discontinuities, principally continuities within the socio-economic and cultural spheres. Within the ecclesiastical sphere, however, the picture has been seen to be less clear. The parishioners, as in Portree, generally opted for the Free Church, but whereas in the Skye parish this represented a break with their parish minister, this was not the case in Tain. The same minister, the same elders and the same pulpit message would have provided a sense of continuity, as indeed, in a totally opposing sense, did the situation in Strath. However, the need for new church buildings and a new source of finance presented discontinuity, as did the break with the traditional parochial system and the freedom from interference from civil courts within the purely religious arena.

As affirmed at the beginning of this paper, the Disruption could clearly be regarded as representing a discontinuity, the Free Church seeing itself as an alternative “national” and indeed “true” national Church and rupturing

connections with the secular state and the established parochial setup. At a national level, particularly in religio-political, socio-political and spiritual spheres, the change was dramatic, none of the earlier schisms having had such a remarkable impact. The Free Church had thrown down a challenge in that it did not regard itself as a “voluntary”. Locally it presented a challenge to the traditional picture of the parish church acting as a significant “contributor to the institutional cohesion of the community”.⁴⁶ Communities were split and social and educational responsibilities changed, a situation occurring in many areas of Scotland, especially the Highlands and the large cities.

However, as this paper and the thesis from which the material has been taken have both endeavoured to demonstrate, the situation at individual parish level did not always reflect national or regional patterns. Other parishes apart from Strath remained firmly in the Establishment, especially in the Lowlands. Where adherence to the Free Church was strong, fracturing and discontinuities were variable, as the disparate pictures in Tain and Portree have exemplified. Nevertheless, despite undoubtedly changes, these were often of an administrative rather than spiritual nature.

Finally, to travel full circle and return to the opening contention that, as David Paton has affirmed, the Disruption could be regarded as a revival in itself, a movement of religious fervour, its part in a scenario of revivals merits a concluding cluster of observations. It did indeed constitute an immense declaration of faith, a supreme willingness to become enmeshed in a strong web of evangelical religion with its ultimate aim of conversion and the hope of eternal reward. Adherents to the Free Church turned their back on a church whose spiritual affairs were seen to suffer interference from civil courts – a position espoused by the majority of evangelical ministers and preachers. In this sense it was a mass movement within numerous parishes which reflected the mass involvement of folk in revivals from the early eighteenth century onwards. As such, in parishes like Tain and Portree and many others, particularly across the Highlands, the Disruption could indeed be regarded as a climactic revival within a pattern of revivals, recognising that revivals, or their impact, did not touch every

⁴⁶ G. Donaldson, *Scottish Church History* (Edinburgh, 1985), 225, 227.

corner of the nation and in some communities, such as Strath, had little effect. As a revival could the Disruption be interpreted as a continuity or a discontinuity? On the one hand it could be identified as fitting into a series of such movements – a continuity. On the other hand it acted as a culmination of these “awakenings”, carrying with it momentous changes that fell outwith the arena of spiritual renewal and commitment – a discontinuity. It is an interesting angle on the fascinating history of the Disruption, which is continually being re-appraised, the value of local studies being increasingly recognised, and it is to be hoped that this paper and the thesis that inspired it will help to stimulate further investigation and analysis.

Argyll